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GEOPOLITICAL INFLUENCES AND NATO'S ROLE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Edlira TITINI *
Valmir VISHA **

Abstract: *The Western Balkans represent a strategically significant region for NATO, serving as a key node for security and stability in Europe and beyond. This article aims to examine the geopolitical dynamics and NATO's role in the region, particularly in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the potential risk of conflict spillover. Such a strategy could be employed by Russia to divert international support away from Ukraine. The analysis begins by assessing the geopolitical positioning of the Western Balkans, focusing on the influence of major global powers such as Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union. Russia, through hybrid strategies and diplomatic and economic influence, seeks to undermine NATO's presence in the region and obstruct the integration of Balkan states into the EU. Meanwhile, China leverages infrastructure investments to establish economic dependencies, projecting its power and posing a challenge to the security of Western Balkan countries. Additionally, the article explores the Western Balkans from NATO's perspective, examining the Alliance's long-standing commitments to regional stabilization, its enlargement process, and its role in ensuring security under NATO's current Strategic Concept. Ultimately, the article concludes that NATO remains the primary actor capable of ensuring stability in the Western Balkans. The Alliance plays a decisive role in advancing Euro-Atlantic integration and preventing future crises. To fulfill this role effectively, greater engagement from regional states is necessary, given the heightened security risks at both the regional and global levels.*

Keywords: *Western Balkans; Geopolitics; NATO; Euro-Atlantic integration; strategic concept*

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* PhD, Academy of Armed Forces, Tirana, Albania, Corresponding author: edlira.titini@yahoo.com.
** MSc., University of Tirana, Tirana, Albania, E-mail: valmirvisha976@gmail.com.

1. Introduction

Positioned at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, the Western Balkans has long been a region of strategic importance, shaping trade routes, geopolitical influence, and security dynamics. This complex interplay of economic, political, and security factors is further compounded by a diverse landscape of religions, ethnicities, and languages, intertwined with a turbulent history of territorial disputes and interethnic conflicts. Due to its strategic position, the Western Balkans has traditionally been an arena where major global powers compete for influence.

This paper examines the impact of four key international actors, the European Union, the United States, China, and Russia, on the geopolitical landscape of the Western Balkans, highlighting the vulnerabilities that expose the region to external pressures in today's global context. As Russia has a strategic interest in diverting Western attention and support away from Ukraine, the fragile stability of the Western Balkans makes it a plausible target for conflict escalation within Europe. In such a scenario, NATO's presence in the region remains a decisive factor in preventing destabilization and guaranteeing regional security.

Furthermore, this study explores NATO's engagement in the Western Balkans by reviewing its four strategic concepts in the post-Cold War era. Through a qualitative analysis of official documents, policy reports, and academic literature, it evaluates NATO's role as the most reliable guarantor of security and stability in the region. More than just attentive to the Balkans, NATO has demonstrated its capacity to restore and maintain peace, reinforcing its position as the only actor capable of preventing further destabilization in the Western Balkans. Its presence serves as both a deterrent and a stabilizing force, ensuring security in a region that is entirely surrounded by EU member states, whose stability directly impacts the European Union and the broader Euro-Atlantic space.

2. Global Powers' External Influence

The Western Balkans has long been a focal point of geopolitical competition, shaped by the strategic interests of external actors. The European Union, the United States, China, and Russia each exert significant influence in the Western Balkans, shaping the region's political, economic, and security landscape through distinct but interconnected approaches.

The European Union has long prioritized stability in the Western Balkans through integration, responding to the conflicts of the 1990s with concrete security and defense measures (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2025). The launch of EU Police Mission (EU Police Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025) in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Concordia (Portero, 2012, p. 68) in North Macedonia marked the EU's first such missions under the Common Security and Defense Policy. Today, EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina and EULEX in Kosovo demonstrate the EU's continued commitment to peace and security in the region, supported by the European Union Special Representatives. Additionally, as the largest donor, investor, and trading partner, the EU plays a central role in the region's economic development, assisting with integration into the Single Market and promoting regional cooperation and diplomatic stability (Western Balkans, 2025).

During the 1990s, the United States played a pivotal role in the international efforts to establish peace in the Western Balkans, bringing an end to violent conflicts first in Bosnia and Herzegovina and later in Kosovo (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2025). Over the following decade, the U.S. engaged in a sustained diplomatic and economic initiative aimed at facilitating post-conflict reconstruction and stabilization across the region. These efforts were reinforced by the processes of NATO and European Union integration, yielding significant outcomes: Albania and Croatia became NATO members in 2009, followed by Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020. This strategic engagement contributed to the broader stabilization and Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans.

However, while the EU and the U.S. prioritize stability through integration, China takes a different approach, focusing on economic engagement. China has made significant inroads into the Balkans through the Belt and Road Initiative, offering large-scale infrastructure projects and investments aimed at integrating the region into its broader strategy for political and economic expansion in Europe (Zeneli, 2022). Projects such as the Balkan Silk Road (Reconnecting Asia, 2025) have the potential to reduce transport costs and times, diversify exports, and enhance regional connectivity and cooperation, fostering much-needed economic growth (Tonchev, 2017). However, the influx of Chinese capital raises concerns about debt dependency (Bastian, 2017), as many investments are offered as loans that burden recipient states. Additionally, this financial leverage and strategic presence risk shifting the region's orientation away from the EU (Stanicek & Tarpova, 2022) and NATO, undermining the long-term strategic interests of the West.

Russia has long been leveraging historical, cultural and ideological ties to advance its economic and energy interests, weaken the West, and undermine the Western

Balkans integration into the European Union and NATO (Stojarová, 2023, p. 167). Following its aggression against Ukraine, Russia is interested in deepening divisions within the region and weaponizing interreligious and interethnic tensions to advance its strategic goals. By capitalizing on its close relationships with Serbia and Republika Srpska, Moscow may seek to navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape by influencing regional stability in ways that align with its interests.

Historically, Russia has played a leading role in supporting its Slavic and Orthodox Christian allies in Serbia and the broader region (Russia's Influence in the Balkans, 2023). Russia's contribution to sovereignty recognition in the Treaty of San Stefano and later at the Congress of Berlin exemplifies this broader historical support, as Serbia and Montenegro gained full independence, while Bulgaria, secured autonomy under Ottoman suzerainty.

These longstanding bonds, ethnic, religious, historical, and cultural, constitute the core of Russia's soft power appeal in Serbia and in Serb-majority territories across the region. This sense of historical closeness and civilizational kinship reinforces public sentiment that views Russia not only as a traditional ally, but also as a key supporter of Serbia's national interests (Russian Soft Power in the Balkans: A True Love Story?, 12). A central pillar of this perception lies in Russia's steadfast support for Serbia's position on Kosovo, especially its refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence (Russia confirms veto on Kosovo independence, 2007) and its role in obstructing Kosovo's membership or participation in various international organizations.

This alignment reflects a convergence of mutual strategic interests: Serbia benefits from Russia's diplomatic backing on the Kosovo issue, while Russia maintains its geopolitical foothold in the region by consistently supporting Serbian positions. Serbia's refusal to join Western sanctions (Russia and Ukraine politics, 2025) against Russia, despite deep economic ties with the European Union, demonstrates a pragmatic decision to preserve this alignment. More broadly, it reflects Serbia's interest in securing Russian support should future geopolitical shifts create opportunities to reopen questions regarding the territorial integrity or statehood of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, positions already contested by Serbian political leadership and the Republika Srpska entity, respectively.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the leader of Republika Srpska has visited Moscow multiple times (Bosnian Serb Leader Visits Moscow Days After Court Requests Arrest Warrant, 2025), coinciding with escalating tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and renewed calls for secession by Republika Srpska under Dodik's

leadership. Meanwhile, instability in Kosovo has risen. Following Serbia's boycott of local elections in April 2023, tensions escalated, leading to protests and violent clashes with KFOR forces in May.

The crisis deepened in September when Serbian militants launched an armed attack in Banjska, resulting in the death of a Kosovo police officer.

Further concerns emerged in December 2024 with the discovery of hidden arms depots and an explosion that disrupted the water supply to multiple municipalities. The damage also affected electricity production, as the canal's water plays a crucial role in cooling the Kosova B power plant. These disruptions have heightened fears of broader instability, raising concerns about potential attempts to weaken Kosovo's critical infrastructure.

Taken together, these developments suggest broader geopolitical patterns rather than isolated incidents. As scholars (Wouter et al., 2025) and military strategists continue to debate the impact of military preparedness on regional stability, Fleischaker argues that military capability and pre-crisis preparations not only help prevent crises from emerging but also shape their dynamics should they materialize (Fleischaker, 2022). In this context, the Latin phrase attributed to Vegetius, "Si vis pacem, para bellum" if you want peace, prepare for war, underscores the critical role of strategic deterrence. This principle remains central to discussions on security commitments in the Western Balkans and their broader implications within the Euro-Atlantic framework.

3. NATO in the Balkans after the Cold War

The collapse of communism led to significant geopolitical shifts that reshaped Europe's security architecture. The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the restoration of sovereignty to former satellite states, and the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Central and Eastern Europe significantly reduced the immediate threat of large-scale military confrontation (The Alliance's New Strategic Concept, 2022, pp. par.1,5,9). However, these transformations also exposed latent ethnic and political tensions, particularly in the Balkans, where Yugoslavia's fragmentation precipitated instability and violent conflicts.

Recognizing these evolving security challenges, NATO's 1991 Strategic Concept redefined the Alliance's priorities. Rather than focusing solely on conventional military threats, NATO began addressing the risks posed by political, economic, and

social instability, particularly ethnic rivalries and territorial disputes across Central and Eastern Europe (The Alliance's New Strategic Concept, 2022, p. par.9). While these tensions did not directly threaten NATO member states' territorial integrity, they had the potential to escalate into broader crises, destabilizing Europe, drawing in external powers, and affecting NATO's strategic interests. Consequently, arms control, diplomatic engagement, and cooperation with former adversaries became fundamental tools for maintaining security (The Alliance's New Strategic Concept, 2022, pp. par.25-28).

Although the 1991 Strategic Concept did not explicitly reference the Balkans, it provided a broader framework for addressing post-Cold War security challenges. This strategic shift gained increasing relevance as Yugoslavia's disintegration led to violent conflicts, prompting NATO to assume a more active role in crisis management. The principles outlined in 1991 document guided the Alliance's expanding engagement beyond its traditional borders, shaping its involvement in peacekeeping and stabilization missions, first in Bosnia and later in Kosovo. In this way, the Balkans became a key test case for NATO's evolving approach to safeguarding European security in the post-Cold War era.

The 1999 NATO Strategic Concept was developed during the ongoing Kosovo War, reflecting the Alliance's evolving approach to security challenges in the post-Cold War era. This document underscored the necessity of a more flexible and comprehensive strategy, expanding NATO's role beyond traditional collective defense. It prioritized conflict prevention, crisis management, and peace support operations, positioning NATO as a central actor in ensuring Euro-Atlantic stability.

In the context of the Balkans, the 1999 Strategic Concept further legitimized NATO's engagement in the region, particularly through its intervention in Kosovo. The document recognized emerging threats such as oppression, ethnic conflicts, political disorder, economic instability, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, establishing NATO as a stabilizing force. Its commitment to conflict prevention and crisis management was exemplified by the 1999 military intervention against Serbian forces in Kosovo, which aimed to halt ethnic cleansing and create conditions for peace.

Additionally, the document reinforced NATO's willingness to collaborate with international organizations like the UN and OSCE, offering resources and expertise for peacekeeping operations. This approach was reflected in post-war operations in Kosovo, where NATO played a leading role through KFOR in ensuring security and stability.

Overall, the 1999 Strategic Concept marked a pivotal shift in NATO's role in the Balkans, transforming the Alliance into an active mechanism for regional peace and stability. It legitimized NATO's interventions beyond its traditional territory and set a precedent for future engagements in similar crises.

The 2010 NATO Strategic Concept reaffirmed the Alliance's commitment to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans, aiming to establish lasting peace and stability through democratic values, regional cooperation, and good neighborly relations (Active Engagement, Modern Defence, 2010, p. 31).

Building on lessons learned from previous operations in the region, NATO underscored the necessity of a comprehensive political, civilian, and military approach to crisis management. This strategy involved close collaboration with international actors at all stages, before, during, and after crises, to optimize effectiveness and ensure sustainable security outcomes (Active Engagement, Modern Defence, 2010, p. 19).

Moreover, the framework emphasized NATO's role in facilitating the Western Balkans' integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Through mechanisms such as the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the Partnership for Peace, NATO reinforced diplomatic ties while supporting stability and security-building initiatives (Active Engagement, Modern Defence, 2010, pp. 30-31). The Alliance also reiterated its commitment to crisis response operations, maintaining its readiness to act in coordination with organizations such as the UN and the OSCE when necessary.

Overall, the 2010 Strategic Concept strengthened NATO's proactive approach to stabilizing the Western Balkans, affirming a long-term commitment to the region's security through diplomatic, military, and cooperative efforts. This sustained engagement reflected the Alliance's broader mission of promoting peace and stability across the Euro-Atlantic area, ensuring that regional security remained a cornerstone of its strategic vision.

4. NATO's Ongoing Role in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans region comprises three NATO member states, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, and three non-member states, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. While NATO member states contribute to regional stability through direct participation, non-member states maintain varying degrees of cooperation with the Alliance. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia engage through the Partnership for Peace program, though Serbia remains steadfast in its

policy of military neutrality and does not pursue NATO membership. Meanwhile, Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession faces opposition from Republika Srpska and resistance from Serbian political factions, highlighting internal divisions that complicate integration.

In Kosovo, NATO has maintained a presence since June 1999 through the KFOR peacekeeping mission, ensuring stability amid ongoing diplomatic disputes. However, Kosovo remains outside NATO due to its non-recognition by four member states.

The 2022 NATO Strategic Concept explicitly recognizes the strategic importance of the Western Balkans and underscores the Alliance's commitment to supporting security and stability in the region (NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, 2023, p. 11). To effectively counter security challenges, NATO prioritizes efforts to reinforce security frameworks, deter external influence, and foster sustainable integration.

This strategy was evident in 2023, when NATO deployed additional troops following an armed attack on Kosovo's special police units in Banjska, ensuring KFOR had the necessary forces to fulfill its mandate. The Strategic Concept highlights the need to counter external coercion, particularly efforts by Russia, China, and other actors seeking to expand their influence through disinformation (Valasek, 21 April 2025, pp. 2-5, 9), economic pressure (Budová et al., 2024, p. 223), and other forms of manipulation (Stanicek & Caprile, 2023, p. 5).

In response, NATO has deepened cooperation with Western Balkan nations and international organizations such as the EU and UN, recognizing that enhanced security frameworks and capacity-building efforts are essential for regional stability.

Ultimately, the security of the Western Balkans is directly tied to the stability of NATO's southeastern flank, the credibility of the Alliance's Open-Door policy, and the broader European security environment (Valasek, 21 April 2025, p. 14). Addressing these challenges requires a proactive strategy that reinforces resilience, deters external interference, and fosters sustainable integration (Valasek, 21 April 2025, pp. 14-15).

5. Conclusion

The Western Balkans remains a strategically significant region at the crossroads of geopolitical rivalries, historical divisions, and ongoing efforts toward Euro-Atlantic integration. Major global actors, including the European Union, the United States, China, and Russia, pursue distinct interests, with the EU and U.S. advocating for

democratization and regional cooperation, while Russia and China seek to challenge Western influence through political and economic means.

Within this complex geopolitical landscape, NATO has emerged as the most credible and capable guarantor of stability in the Western Balkans, serving as the security pillar of the Western alliance. Through successive Strategic Concepts and operational engagements, including KFOR in Kosovo, NATO has demonstrated both commitment and capacity to address security threats, manage crises, and support long-term regional peace.

Beyond crisis management, NATO plays a strategic role in strengthening regional resilience, countering external interference, and advancing Euro-Atlantic integration. Given the region's vulnerability to political manipulation, ethnic tensions, and foreign influence, NATO's presence remains essential to deterring instability and preserving Europe's security architecture. Moreover, the stability of the Western Balkans is directly linked to that of NATO's southeastern flank, the credibility of the Alliance's Open-Door policy, and the broader European security environment.

It can be concluded that NATO remains the most reliable and strategically positioned actor in safeguarding stability in the Western Balkans. With its political will, institutional mechanisms, and strategic interests, the Alliance is well-equipped to continue fulfilling this role. Sustained engagement and collaboration with the EU and regional partners will be vital to ensure the Western Balkans advances toward a secure, democratic, and fully integrated future within the Euro-Atlantic framework.

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